



COUNTERING HUMAN RIGHTS REGRESSION TO SAFEGUARD PEACE

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Abstract

This policy brief analyses the accelerating trend of human rights regression observed in early 2025 and its implications for global peace and security. Drawing on Human Rights Watch's April 2025 report, "100 Human Rights Harms in 100 Days", it identifies three interlinked threats: the erosion of democratic institutions, discriminatory policies targeting vulnerable populations, and the deliberate retreat from multilateral frameworks. These developments directly contradict the commitments of the 2024 UN Pact for the Future, which reaffirmed the centrality of human rights to sustainable peace. The brief concludes with strategic imperatives for governments, international organisations, civil society, and funders to reverse current backsliding and restore rights-based approaches to conflict prevention, bridging the growing gap between multilateral aspirations and national realities.

Introduction

The first quarter of 2025 has witnessed a sharp acceleration in democratic backsliding and human rights regression – developments with far-reaching consequences for international peace and stability. Across multiple regions, elected governments are dismantling oversight bodies, suppressing civil society, and weakening rule-of-law institutions. These actions are not isolated; they reflect a convergence of authoritarian practices – from the United States under a second Trump administration to Hungary under Orbán, Israel under Netanyahu, El Salvador under Bukele, and formerly Bangladesh under Hasina. Together, these cases point to a broader global trend: the deliberate weakening of democratic resilience in favour of centralised executive control.

In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has promoted a vision of Hindu nationalism that undermines the country's secular democratic foundation. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) processes have disproportionately targeted Muslim communities, sparking nationwide protests and international condemnation. These policies are accompanied by rising hate speech, state-linked disinformation campaigns, and frequent acts of violence against Muslims—including lynchings—that often go unpunished. This environment has emboldened extremist actors and deepened communal divisions, threatening both domestic stability and the inclusive values enshrined in India's Constitution.

These developments directly contradict commitments made in September 2024 through the United Nations Pact for the Future, which reaffirmed human rights as the foundation for an inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable future for all. Specifically, the Pact's Article 10 calls for strengthening democratic governance and protecting civic space, which stands in stark contrast to the current erosion of democratic institutions.

Historical context: Rights as a foundation for peace

The international order that emerged after the Second World War rested on a core principle: that human dignity and rights are essential to preventing violent conflict. The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and subsequent legal instruments created a normative framework that privileged multilateralism, accountability, and the rule of law over power politics and impunity.

Throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, international and regional human rights frameworks helped to solidify this understanding. The European Convention on Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights all played important roles in creating peaceful, rules-based communities.

Beginning in the 1990s, the UN increasingly integrated human rights into conflict prevention and peacebuilding work, reflected in the Brahimi Report, the Human Rights Up Front initiative, and most recently, the 2016 resolutions on Sustaining Peace. This rights-based approach found renewed support in the 2024 Pact for the Future, which affirmed that 'respect for human rights is foundational to the new peace and security agenda.'

Patterns of Human Rights regression

EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The erosion of democratic institutions—often carried out through legal means cloaked in legitimacy—remains the most dangerous pattern. In the United States, recent executive actions have included the dismissal of inspectors general, defunding of civil rights offices, and curtailment of independent agency oversight. These measures hollow out institutional accountability while concentrating power in the executive branch.

Similar patterns are evident elsewhere. In Hungary, Prime Minister Orbán's government continues to weaken judicial independence through constitutional amendments, while government-aligned media outlets openly intimidate judges who resist political pressure. In Israel, the Netanyahu coalition has followed what legal experts describe as a "textbook approach" to capture and politicise key institutions.

The strategies employed across these contexts are remarkably similar. First, political leaders frame independent oversight as an obstacle to effective governance. Next, they use parliamentary majorities to change rules governing appointments, jurisdictions, or funding streams. Finally, they populate institutions with loyalists who prioritise political allegiance over professional standards. This systematic capture proceeds incrementally, making it difficult for observers to mobilise effective resistance until democratic guardrails have been significantly weakened.

When courts are politicised and independent oversight collapses, the conditions for peaceful dispute resolution evaporate. These developments stand in stark contrast to the Pact for the Future's calls to protect civic space and democratic integrity.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MARGINALISED GROUPS

A second key pattern is the deliberate targeting of vulnerable populations—immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, racial minorities, religious groups, and women—through restrictive laws and rhetoric that deepens social polarisation.

In the United States, policies reinstated in early 2025 have dramatically curtailed reproductive rights, restricted access to asylum, and removed anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. Amnesty International has described this wave of actions as "reversing decades of hard-won gains in the struggle for universal rights."

The trend toward discriminatory policies is particularly concerning for children's rights. According to UNICEF data from 2024, the number of children affected by conflict-driven humanitarian emergencies has reached an all-time high of 262 million, with girls and children from minority groups facing disproportionate impacts. Rather than strengthening protections, many governments are actively dismantling support systems and legal safeguards.

These policies fracture the social contract. Rights-based peacebuilding depends on inclusion. When marginalised groups are vilified or excluded, societal cohesion unravels – and the risks of conflict rise.

Across multiple contexts, governments are withdrawing from global norms not out of indifference but as a deliberate strategy to shield themselves from accountability. This fragmentation of the international order contradicts the core ambition of the Pact: to revitalise multilateralism in the face of systemic risk.

RETREAT FROM MULTILATERALISM

A third defining pattern is the abandonment of multilateral cooperation and international accountability mechanisms. The Trump administration's continued disengagement from international health, climate, and refugee frameworks weakens shared problem-solving capacities. Elsewhere, leaders are increasingly defiant of international institutions.

Hungary, once a leading proponent of EU integration, now actively undermines EU legal standards and is perceived by some as aligning more closely with Russia than Brussels. Israel, facing international scrutiny over conduct in Gaza, has rejected the authority of the International Criminal Court, which issued arrest warrants in 2024 for senior Israeli officials.

The financial dimensions of this retreat are particularly troubling. Funding shortfalls for UN agencies have reached crisis levels, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reporting in March 2025 that operations in key conflict zones were facing cuts of up to 40% due to reduced contributions from major donor states. Similarly, the UN Peacebuilding Fund—a critical instrument for conflict prevention—received only 67% of its target funding in 2024, limiting its ability to support crucial initiatives in fragile states.

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Security implications

HEIGHTENED DOMESTIC INSTABILITY

When rights protections are eroded and institutions are captured, societies become more volatile. Grievances that cannot be peacefully addressed through courts or representative systems are more likely to erupt in unrest.

Bangladesh provides a sobering example. After years of repression under Sheikh Hasina, a wave of student-led protests in 2024 toppled the government – but only after months of violence, arrests, and political chaos. In Tunisia, the rollback of democratic reforms since 2021 has contributed to renewed authoritarianism, increased economic instability, and rising emigration.

The connection between rights violations and conflict is also evident in Myanmar, where the military junta's brutal campaign against civilians since the 2021 coup has fueled a nationwide civil war. By early 2025, the regime had lost control of substantial territory to resistance forces, with humanitarian organisations warning of a catastrophic toll on civilian populations. Had international actors responded more forcefully to early warning signs of rights abuses, the escalation to full-scale civil war might have been prevented.

These cases underscore a critical lesson: human rights violations are not simply a domestic issue – they are early warning signs of conflict. As former UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson warned, “Rights violations are ‘the canary in the coalmine’, if you see what I mean. Namely, the warnings that we are running out of oxygen – or, the spirit of freedom that we need to always have around us.” He added, “We have waited far too long, waited often for mass atrocities to occur, instead of acting at the early stages.”

WEAKENING OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The weakening of regional and international institutions further compounds the risk. While the EU has formal mechanisms such as Article 7 to censure backsliding member states, enforcement remains uneven due to political divisions. Similarly, the African Union has often struggled to respond consistently to constitutional violations or violent crackdowns.

As these institutions falter, the ability to mobilise early warning, mediation, and conflict prevention efforts diminishes. The erosion of civil society—through laws targeting NGOs, attacks on journalists, or surveillance of activists—further undermines conflict prevention capacities.

NORMATIVE BREAKDOWN

Perhaps most fundamentally, the current wave of regression represents a breakdown in the shared normative frameworks that have governed international relations for decades. When governments treat rights as optional and multilateral rules as negotiable, it creates permissive conditions for impunity, violence, and transnational destabilisation.

The suppression of independent media exemplifies this breakdown. In Hungary, India, and Nicaragua, governments have used licensing laws, state-controlled outlets, and targeted intimidation to erode press freedom and silence dissent. The result is a vacuum of accountability in which abuse thrives unchecked.

The Pact's Declaration on Future Generations called for a renewed sense of long-term responsibility. The continued dismantling of rights-based institutions undermines that promise – leaving future generations more vulnerable to both repression and instability.

Strategic imperatives

To reverse the tide of regression, a new coalition for rights-based peacebuilding must act decisively. This brief proposes five strategic imperatives, each accompanied by tailored actions for key stakeholders:

Fortify Democratic Institutions

Governments must enact constitutional and statutory safeguards to insulate oversight bodies, electoral commissions, and judicial appointments from political interference. International actors should offer technical support while conditioning assistance on genuine reforms that strengthen institutional independence.

Key Actions by Stakeholder:

- Governments: Enact and enforce legal guarantees for judicial independence and non-partisan electoral management bodies.
- Multilateral institutions: Tie assistance to benchmarks on rule-of-law protections.
- Civil society: Document interference in oversight institutions and advocate for institutional integrity.
- Donors: Provide targeted support to domestic reformers and legal accountability initiatives.

Protect Marginalised Communities

Legal protections against discrimination must be codified, not merely promulgated through executive orders that can be reversed. International organisations should invest in enforcement and reporting mechanisms that track violations affecting vulnerable groups. Civil society actors must build alliances across sectors to defend inclusive governance.

Key Actions by Stakeholder:

- Governments: Pass enforceable anti-discrimination laws and repeal exclusionary policies.
- International organisations: Support independent reporting and accountability mechanisms.
- Civil society: Strengthen cross-movement alliances and public campaigns to protect targeted groups.
- Funders: Prioritise support for frontline defenders of minority rights.

Recommit to Multilateralism

States must actively support international institutions—financially and politically—and demonstrate good-faith implementation of human rights obligations. Regional bodies should develop tools to sanction violations more effectively. Civil society should maintain shadow monitoring mechanisms that hold governments accountable even in the absence of formal enforcement.

Key Actions by Stakeholder:

- States: Increase funding and support for the UN human rights system and other treaty bodies.
- Regional bodies: Establish responsive mechanisms to deter and penalise rights violations.
- Civil society: Engage in independent monitoring and reporting to international forums.

Support Civil Society Resilience

Funders must provide flexible, long-term support to civil society organisations at risk, especially in repressive environments. Core funding, legal defense resources, and digital security training are essential for sustaining civic space. Locally rooted organisations—particularly those led by women, youth, and marginalised groups—should be prioritised.

Key Actions by Stakeholder:

- Funders: Provide core, flexible support and legal protections to civic actors.
- Governments: Roll back laws that criminalise protest and civic organising.
- International NGOs: Offer digital security and advocacy support to partners in high-risk settings.

Build Independent Accountability Systems

Governments and multilateral institutions must establish independent monitoring and implementation frameworks to assess progress against Pact for the Future commitments. Domestic accountability systems—such as national human rights institutions—should be insulated from executive interference. Civil society networks should collaborate across borders to generate early warning and strategic response.

Key Actions by Stakeholder:

- Governments: Strengthen independent national human rights institutions and ensure budgetary autonomy.
- UN and multilateral bodies: Develop monitoring frameworks linked to SDG and Pact commitments.
- Civil society: Collaborate across borders to detect and respond to early warning signs.

Conclusion

The global regression in rights protections unfolding in early 2025 represents a serious threat to both national and international peace. Whether in the multiple countries across different regions, the dismantling of rights-based governance is contributing to instability, polarisation, and violence. These are not aberrations – they are symptoms of a deeper normative shift.

The Pact for the Future was intended to renew global consensus around inclusive, rights-based multilateralism. That consensus will remain aspirational unless concrete steps are taken to close the widening gap between rhetoric and reality.

This is a moment that demands strategic foresight and political courage. By reinforcing democratic institutions, safeguarding the rights of the vulnerable, recommitting to multilateral norms, investing in civil society, and building resilient accountability systems, the international community can resist the tide of regression and lay the foundation for a more just and peaceful future

The alternative—passivity in the face of creeping authoritarianism—would be a betrayal not only of the UN Charter but of the generations yet to come.

NOTES

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